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THE YUKON COUNTRY.*

BY THE RT. REV. P. T. ROWE.

BISHOP OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF ALASKA.

Chas. J. 1899

ALASKA, as you know, has attracted the attention of the world, and people from nearly all countries have been finding their way to it. The year 1897 will go down in history as the year 1849, and we who have been here or come here during that time will, as the "forty-niners," be called "ninety-seveners." If you stop and think of the surprising population in Dyey, Skaguay, Dawson, and St. Michael, and remember that up to August, 1897, only the latter had any sort of an existence, you will have an evidence of the great multitude which have been drawn to Alaska. Dyey and Skaguay are the doors through which this throng has passed to the interior, and have respectively a population of five and eight thousand.

Two or three sea-going vessels were the

usual number that entered the harbor of St. Michael in previous years. This year, at the time of my visit, I counted twenty-seven large ships lying at anchor and waiting to be discharged, to say nothing of the very many river steamers and harbor lighters which filled the bay and presented an array of shipping which could scarcely be equaled in the harbors of San Francisco or Seattle. The shore, which, like an arc, forms the bay, was lined with houses, warehouses, two splendid hotels, tents, boats under construction, and a moving mass of humanity, presenting a scene almost incredible.

The route indicated by me last year as the one which would naturally and easily become the popular one to the Yu'kon was the one by Skaguay and the White Pass or Dyey and the Chilkoot. This has already been demonstrated to be right. The route by way of the Stickeen and Lake Teslin

*This abstract of a lecture delivered at Sitka, Alaska, September 14, 1898, is published through the courtesy of the editor of *The Alaskan*.

can never be a contesting one with that by Skaguay unless a railroad is built for 150 miles to connect the watercourses. The Dalton trail over the Chilkoot is easy for the man who travels light and can afford to use horses, but for the miner with a year's outfit there is but one way—through Skaguay or Dyea. It is only twenty-five miles from tide-water to the lakes on the other side of White and Chilkoot Passes. That is a comparatively short distance in which to pack and sled an outfit, rendered cheap and easy now by reason of Brackett's macadamized road, the railroad now building, tramways, and excellent pack-trains. Once the lakes beyond the passes are reached, the miner can build his boat, put in his outfit, and travel easily down the great watercourse of 2,000 or more miles, if he chooses, transporting from one to ten tons, and without touching it again unless he chooses for the sake of safety to portage some of it at Miles Canyon and White Horse Rapids.

Since I went in this spring three steamers have been built which now run in from Lake Bennett to Dawson City in a few days and people can go and come by means of these in a short time. However, it is possible to leave Skaguay and reach Dawson in seven or eight days. The return trip will take twelve or more days. I am not going to take up your time with a description of the White and Chilkoot Passes. Suffice it to say that the former is easy and safe, and with the present facilities of transportation you can get into a wagon at Skaguay and ride all the way to Lake Bennett. This is called "the rich man's road." Chilkoot Pass is steep and is called "the poor man's pass," because with the tramway facilities you can get your outfit put over a few cents cheaper than on the former. On account of the calamitous snowslide which occurred this spring near the Chilkoot Pass, people are very apt to consider it a dangerous route, and this may be true; avalanches may occur under certain conditions and people may be caught by them, but a little good sense will enable them to avoid the same. This year I found the climb of Chilkoot made easy from the fact that steps

had been cut up the steep incline. It is steep—so much so that the face of the ascent seemed only a few inches from the chest. I passed up during a snow storm, and when I reached the summit or a little on the other side a wonderful scene was disclosed. There, in a confused throng, mingled over 2,000 men, sleds, dogs, etc., indiscriminately. A long line of loaded sleds waited in turn to go down. A man with his loaded sled would start; all waited until he reached the bottom, which he did guiding his sled, more often the sled guiding him, and then at the bottom sled, man, and dog would pile up in a mixed condition, while eager and willing hands would try to find the man. The noise and confusion were startling.

We found the trail from Crater Lake to Lake Linderman good. At the latter place we found a veritable town of white tents. Two years ago I did not see a hut or cabin here. Now there is a population of 8,000 or so, an alert, eager, pushing, but good-natured crowd. It is four and a half miles across Linderman to the cañon which joins it with Lake Bennett. As I mounted the last hill, there stretched far away beautiful Lake Bennett with the high mountains on each side, and at my feet another town in this wilderness of some 15,000 people. I wandered through this place for two hours before I could find a suitable place to pitch my tent. It was a busy scene, stores, saloons, "bunk-houses," police quarters, log cabins, tents galore making up the place. There is a saw-mill here and lumber sells at twenty-five cents per foot; it is only fifteen cents at Circle City. Small Yukon boats are built for prices varying from \$100 to \$500. I saw one of the three steamers for the lake and river route on the way. It seemed to be 100 feet long by 15 feet beam. I spent Sunday preaching to 150 men or so. The ice was bad but I determined to "mush on."

Down the lake on the south shore the tents were so numerous that you could hardly throw a stick without striking one. While going down this lake we heard what seemed a far-off roar like thunder and look-

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ing to the north shore of the lake there the very mountain seemed to be moving. It was a snowslide, a mile, I should think, in width, and it was terrific in motion, force, and noise, pushing itself nearly a mile from shore upon the lake. The first day we made seven miles, but the sledding was soft, the sun hot, and hauling 450 pounds took the heart out of one. We camped, started at 3 o'clock next morning, made the foot of Lake Bennett, where we found the river open and the shore snow gone, descended it until we struck the ice and snow, then on we went, making twenty-two miles that day and hauling 450 pounds.

Next day we passed Caribou Crossing, struck out on Tagish Lake, passing the boisterous Windy Arm, into which the winter trail from Skaguay, called the "Tuh-shai," enters. This trail makes a saving of twenty miles, but is only passable while the ice and snow last. We made the foot of Tagish Lake, twenty-six miles, that day. Here Five Mile River was open and we had to go into camp and build our boat. I picked out the trees, cut them down, topped them myself, marked them out, rolled them from the woods and out upon a saw-pit, which we had prepared. So here we worked that whip-saw which miners declare is an invention of Satan, until lumber was sawed to build our boat. We spent two weeks at this work. Then we loaded in our outfit and pulled down Five Mile River to the Police Post, which nestled amid a grove of spruce trees, a veritable picnic ground, the tents and quaint log cabins making a picturesque scene. Here every boat is examined and numbered and names are registered.

Police stations are to be seen at different places all the way to Forty Mile from the summit of Chilkoot Pass. In this latter place they act as customs officers. These officials are courteous and kind. But this arrangement of taxing men going into that country is, I suppose, a necessary evil. However, it is a hardship to impose this obstruction and expense on men going in to open up this country, teeming with difficulties enough of a natural sort, and it

ought to be removed. But our own officials began this sort of thing and the Canadians retaliated, with the result that thousands of men are made the innocent sufferers.

We found Marsh Lake blocked with ice and were compelled to camp at the foot of Five Mile River for a week. There is a large section of country here which may some time be utilized in the production of garden stuff. Potatoes, etc., could be raised. The soil and conditions are excellent. If this becomes, as I believe it will, the great thoroughfare into the Yukon country, then we may expect to see a settlement here. I held services here, and campers came to them from their tents for miles around. We spent our nights in spearing fish with home-made spears. Trout—white fish, as they were called, but unlike our Lake Superior fish—were found abundantly. At the end of a week we pushed on, breaking our way through the ice, no easy task but amusing sometimes when somebody—not yourself—fell into that cold, cold water. After hauling my boat over six miles on the ice, I was the first to reach open water and then sailed down Fifty Mile River. Next day we reached Miles Canyon and White Horse Rapids, and though the stage of water made them very bad, yet we ran them in safety. However, upwards of forty-five wrecks had already occurred, with loss of outfits and some loss of life. It is a very dangerous place and needs some experience to navigate safely.

We entered Lake Labarge, where we had some more ice punching to do. Finally we crossed it and entered the swift and dangerous Thirty Mile River. Miners have, in no account of the trip into the Yukon, been warned as to the dangerous navigation of this river. And yet it is the most disastrous portion of the trip. At least 150 boats were wrecked here this year and the loss of life has been very great. The river is narrow, crooked, with very short turns, and the current is a rapid all the way for nearly thirty miles, and great boulders rise to the surface everywhere with too little water running over them for your boat, and they are hard to avoid.

But it is time I told you something in regard to the gold of that country—and gold there is in all parts of it. The latest discovery is one of which you have heard. The discovery has been made on Tagish Lake. Undoubtedly it is away up the Taku arm of the lake, miles away from the usual trail to the Yukon. If accounts be true then this discovery comes very near to us, and settles the question as to the permanent prosperity of Skaguay as well as the universal adoption of this route into the Yukon.

The reports of the Klondike gold district last year were most encouraging, if not incredible. From what I have learned this year of the facts, I feel obliged to discount those reports to some extent. That the region was and is phenomenally rich is true. But the statement made that the wonderful peculiarity of the district was that the rich pay streak was uniform, that every claim contained gold, that there were no "skips," does not seem to be borne out by the facts. For instance claim No. 5 may be very rich, while claim No. 6 or 10 on the same creek may hardly pay wages. Hence it is not unlike that of any other placer region. But after saying all this, the fact that from \$10,000,000 to \$15,000,000 have been brought out this year, in spite of inability to work the claim as well as might have been done on account of scarcity of food and light, is sufficient proof that the region is wonderfully rich in gold.

As early as 1883 the Klondike River was prospected for forty miles of its length without any results. The bed of the river consists of a coarse gravel through which the fine gold would go out of sight. The first rich claims in all that country were struck on Miller and Glacier Creeks, tributaries of Sixty and Forty Mile Rivers, which were the richest discoveries until the strike made in 1896 in the Klondike district. This was in 1891. And yet men had prospected these three different times without any results until the happy discovery in 1891. All this goes to show how uncertain the work of prospecting is. In 1881 the Rev. Archibald McDonald, Church

of England missionary at Fort McPherson, in returning from a visit to the Tanana Indians, picked up a nugget on Birch Creek. But nothing came of that, except the current story that gold had been found there, until 1891, when prospectors established the fact by discovering gold on several creeks, tributaries of Birch, which led to the establishment of Circle City and opening out a gold district which until the Klondike "strike" was the largest and best paying on the Yukon. It is not worked very much just now, nor prospected to any extent, because the claims are not very rich. But there are a great number of creeks where claims will pay \$10 a day, and just as soon as food supplies and labor cheapen, we may expect to see some thousands of men working these and obtaining such wages as cannot be obtained in any other way.

In July, 1896, three men, Henderson, Swanson, and Nanson, prospected up Indian Creek, struck very good pay on Gold Bottom, and staked. Henderson had to return to Forty Mile for food and on the way out met G. C. Cormack and two Indians. Henderson told Cormack about the find (it is a law in the miner's code to report or make known to others that any "strike" has been made). So Cormack and his two Indians traveled across country to Gold Bottom Creek, crossing the "Bonanza" on the way. Cormack was not satisfied with Gold Bottom and returned, determining to try Bonanza, so he sank in several places, but it was finally at a bend midway down the river that he sank and made the famous discovery. In one pan he washed out \$12.75; then, having staked the claim, he returned to Forty Mile for "grub," and told of his discovery. The discovery of Bonanza was followed in August by the rich finds on Eldorado, the results of which are evident in the many thousands who have sought that region from all parts of the world.

It is a rich section, undoubtedly; it is also very extensive. The Eldorado, Bonanza, Dominion, Sulphur Quartz, Rosebud, Hunker, are a few of the many rich

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creeks. The dumps on Sulphur and Dominion were expected, when I was at Dawson this year, to yield returns as rich and great as most of the Eldorado. I have heard since that they did not do so, but it must be remembered that for want of food men could not work their claims as they had hoped; moreover, lights were scarce; candles sold at one dollar each, and then could not be bought. Water, too, failed this year for sluicing the dumps. Mr. Lippi, who went in two years ago, owns one of the richest claims on the Eldorado. He was offered, I was told, \$1,000,000 for his claim and refused it. This year he had been there only a few weeks and was going out with \$200,000.

Standing at the Eldorado, where the pay streak is richest, a line due east runs straight through the rich claims of Hunker, Gold Bottom, etc.; from the same point a line due west and away beyond the Yukon runs through the rich creeks of Sixty, Forty Miles, Birch Creek, etc. What a magnificent distance and extent of territory this is over and in which gold is found!

The innumerable creeks of the Forty Mile, as far to the westward as the watersheds of the Tanana, all carry gold, and it remains yet to be demonstrated by work what wealth they contain. They have not been worked as yet. What little has been done on several has proved quite encouraging. While at Forty Mile two men came in from their winter's work on a claim, weighed out their gold, and after paying all expenses had \$3,000 each for their own. A man and his wife sold their claim on Franklin Creek for \$10,000 and have gone out to make their home at Seattle. They sold too cheap, so men told me who knew the mine. Prospectors tell how on passing this claim they could hear this man and his wife dropping the little gold nuggets, "plunk, plunk," into a tomato can, as though they were pumpkin seeds—and the gold of this creek is of the size and shape of pumpkin seed.

About fifteen miles below the boundary line, on our territory, a live camp has sprung up at the mouth of Mission Creek.

The promise of a town here is due to the fact that very rich claims have been discovered on American Creek (which runs into Mission) and its tributaries. I hope this will prove true.

It is evident, then, that gold is found extensively in large sections of that vast Yukon territory.

You have doubtless heard by this time complaints as to the laws and conditions now existing at Dawson and the Yukon. I confess that complaints were general, both loud and strong, even in Dawson when I was there. The system of royalty, recording, timber licenses, etc., were all denounced. If one tenth of the charges made were true, then there is immediate need of a change; but of this I am unable to speak. The gold commissioner, whom I had the pleasure of meeting, did not strike me as a man who would countenance any dishonorable action or dealing. I am going to speak advisedly, because I cannot vouch as to the absolute truthfulness of these cases, but Captain — of Seattle told me that being very ill—ill all winter—almost in despair of recovery, he gave a friend \$10 to go and get his letters. The man returned and said: "The postmaster (member of the mounted police) said, 'I have no time to bother with his mail for \$10,'" and his letters he did not get. Many similar stories are freely told, and if they are true they are horrible.

In our own territory the law does not seem to be explicit enough; it errs in being too generous. It is possible for one man to locate any number of claims. A friend told me that he had eighty-five claims staked and these almost entirely in one section. They define every creek and every tributary of that creek as a distinct district and according to the law a man can hold one claim in each district. This ought to be regulated by law. A district should embrace a reasonable section, all the creeks and tributaries within it. For want of this a few men can monopolize all the claims, holding them to sell to the "cheecharka," and thereby shutting out the many who, if they had a chance to stake a claim, would remain in the country and aid its development.

This is the reason that ninety-nine men out of every hundred who went in this year have sold their outfit and returned, not having gone a mile from the Yukon to prospect, with the story that the country is no good, has been boomed, etc.

It is true that the extraordinary tales of the Klondike riches have not only attracted many thousands, but have created a wild inflated condition of things which a year or so will remedy. For example, men are offered \$12 a cord to cut wood, and few or no takers. Men do not appear to like to work in there. It is hard to get many to work for even \$12 or \$15 per day. I am not surprised, therefore, that so many are returning dissatisfied.

I reached Dawson when it was partly under flood. The first question asked me when I landed was, "Have you any whisky? We have been without four days and we have been expecting some in over the trail." It came in in a few days—2,000 gallons—which sold for \$75 per gallon. In a few days more the first boat arrived and its load consisted of 600 gallons of whisky, which sold at \$50 per gallon—the first provisions to reach these people reported to be starving. I was told that the man who last year sold ladies' red shirt waists—out of style—for \$5 each, which he had bought in job lots at fifteen cents each, brought in a soda water fountain and made \$14,000 by it in a few weeks. I saw some bananas, asked the price—\$1 a piece. Money! There seems to be no limit to it. But Dawson itself seemed, so far as I could see, free from drink, games of speculation, or lawlessness of any kind. On the water front the crowd swayed to and fro, by night as by day, reminding me in one aspect of the "Midway" at the World's Fair. Sickness has been and is very prevalent at Dawson. Much of it is due to the ill-cooked food which men eat and the Klondike water, which some think is impregnated with arsenic. It is, all in all, a unique place. Its inhabitants are well disposed in every way, and extremely satisfied with the richness of the claims in the district, as well as their great extent.

The minds of all men seem to have become inebriated with the great ideas of sudden fortunes, vast and rich wealth in the claims, and the spirit of speculation has become an epidemic. But in a year or so they will become sober and then the country will be dealt with in a way by which it will be developed and its wonderful resources made apparent. The country is not yet prospected. Ninety-nine out of every hundred who went in this year were not prepared for the above condition of things, and I felt very sorry that this was the case and that they have had to return, not only unrewarded, but after the sacrifices they made and the hardships they endured.

You would be surprised to see the number of steamers which have entered the mighty Yukon this year—that river which but a few years ago never had its solemn silence broken with the whistle of a steamboat. Between Anvik and St. Michael we passed thirty. Beyond Anvik ascending or descending were probably thirty or forty more. You ought to see the magnificent steamers, with their excellent equipment of electric light, etc., similar to and not surpassed by the Mississippi steamboats, built and put on the Yukon by different companies. Those built by the Alaska Commercial Company cost \$95,000 each. One of this company's new tow steamers, *Louise*, came up the river pushing two immense barges loaded with 900 tons of freight, and yet, pushing them up that strong current, made seven and a half miles per hour. And I am positively afraid to think what the result will be of all the capital thus invested in these boats. Is it—will it be—justified? I cannot say. But these companies have trained and experienced men who know their business and understand the conditions, hence we naturally reason that they must be satisfied that the resources of this country must be very rich and great or they would not adventure such an outlay. From \$10,000,000 to \$15,000,000 of an output this year, in the face of extremely difficult conditions, is a wonderful amount; yet it may be doubled next year.